Bellus Mortis

A Thesis Exhibition Statement

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By

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis exhibition to my dearest late grandfather, Peike Sun; and to my esteemed mentors, Bing Li and Xiaolian Wang.

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Introduction

Life and death have long been the focus and inspiration for artists, composers, and philosophers. To live and die is the inevitable condition for all sentient beings. Life is largely celebrated, praised and is generally associated with joy, beauty, and virtue. Death, on the other hand, evokes horror, anguish, and despair. Death is feared and reviled by much of humanity. However, what if the dichotomy between life and death is not as unambiguous as people thought it to be? Why is the alternative term for "Death" called "Afterlife"? People glorify life whilst they demonize death. They usually fail to realize, that life and death are merely two inseparable faces of the same coin: they are indeed mutually exclusive, but neither could exist without another.

The paintings that constitute my thesis exhibition ***Bellus Mortis*** strive to scrutinize the complex nature of life and death and to sift through divergent aspects of death. In my imagery, I have consciously chosen to explore theatrical depictions of various esoteric cultural practices associated with dying. I am also interested in investigating the chronological pictorial representations of Eastern philosophical perspectives of death. Utilizing cryptic and allegorical visual language, I attempt to represent death in a personal and neutral manner that is free from predetermined negativities, prejudice, and stereotypes. My artistic goal is to blur the boundary between the two and to visualize the unappreciated beauty, and tranquility of death.

Additionally, my art is intended to demonstrate that life is not always the sublime gift brimming with ethereal delight that people choose to believe in unquestioningly. Ignore its flaws, an endless life will simply become an eternal torment.

The Origin

My morbid fascination with the dead and decay did not develop overnight. Growing up in a family engrossed in classical Chinese culture, my childhood is engulfed by numerous ancient scrolls and enigmatic opuses. What particularly captivated me were those astonishing mystic geographies, monstrous creatures from *Shan Hai Jing* (山海經*, Classic of Mountain and Seas,* 4th Century BC.), and thrilling, perplexing tales from *Liaozhai Zhiyi* (聊齋誌異*, Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio, 1740.*) by Pu Songling. Most of those stories use ghosts, demons and the undead as protagonists, therefore, the readers could experience the stories from unusual perspectives. These narratives focus on their various interactions with the living beings and whether they choose to exact revenge upon those who did them wrong while living, or to repay the kindness. The author used these supernatural parables about the dead to project his criticism over the injustice of the living society.

The subject of death is thoroughly explored in Chinese Literature. Death is deeply rooted within Chinese culture. Chinese folk religion is based on ancestral worship, and therefore the emphasis on elaborate burial rites and holiday ceremonies centred around the deceased. These rituals are crucial aspects of Chinese society. In the past, wealthy households would build a massive family tomb and have a dedicated shrine to honour their ancestors. Relatives of the recently deceased would hold their vigil and keep mourning for up to three years.

In contemporary times, the tradition of honouring the dead to express the highest of respect continues. Even commoners would spend fortunes on burial practices, and tirelessly go tidy up the tombstones of their deceased relatives during Tomb-Sweeping Day.

However, such “respect” doesn’t translate well into “embrace” in modern Chinese society. Most people are utterly terrified of discussing death in their daily lives. Anything associated with the dead is taboo, and a malediction outside the funeral ground. Many people believe that the mere mentioning of ghosts during lunch hour would become an incantation to summon the spirits, a mere glimpse of a casket on one’s way home could be a menacing omen for great adversity. I still remember the absolute horrid and twisted expression on my primary school teacher’s face when she realized my collage diary from crafting class was made of insect taxidermies and joss papers.[1]

Despite my interest in ghosts and the concept of death from early years, my concerns about the negative reactions of my audiences prevented me from exploring the subject matter freely or directly. Consequently, over the course of time, I lost interest in this topic. Instead, I spent most of my BFA years exploring those lesser known cultures related to the occult and witchcraft.

1. Qiming Sun, *Manjusaka*, oil on canvas, 2015.

[1] Joss papers are symbolic money used in East Asian ancestral worship, commonly burnt as offerings for the dead.

Aesthetically, my paintings from this period abide by a more common sense of "beauty": dreamy, sublime compositions with delicate blossoms and radiant figures. I was attempting to paint like the Old Masters. I was obsessed with the smooth rendering of flawless human skin, along with the complete removal of any trace of prominent mark making. This obsession soon became an obstacle during my early MFA studies.

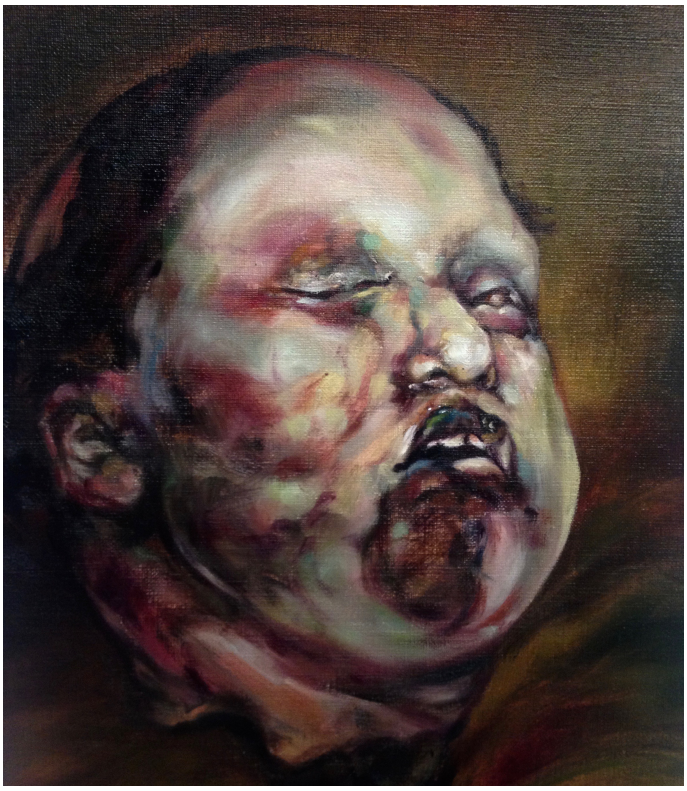
2. Qiming Sun, *The Serpent and the Wisteria Thief* (detail), oil on canvas, 2016.

After working on the same painting intensively for months trying to refine my craftsmanship into "perfection," I found myself instead stuck in the creation process. I realized that I had developed a particular colour palette for the fair, rosy human skin tones and a specific method of paint application. Not to mention this process was an extremely time-consuming method. Over the time it became tiresome, repetitive, and most importantly I wasn't learning anything new. I then decided to shift my focus and return to a long-forsaken topic, a subject

matter that allows me to push myself beyond the restriction of standardized beauty and a fixed colour palette. I found myself choosing to explore the human body in a condition that might be unfamiliar for most people: the skin, flesh, and bones of the dead.

Once the heart stopped beating, the human body will go through a series of dramatic transformations during a rather short period. As the blood freeze inside the veins and previously subtle colours on the skin become saturated. Cobalt, violet and crimson patterns blossom upon the lifeless body. Even the fairest, will slowly bloat up by the noxious gas continuously accumulating inside their bodies.

While these transformations are the most revolting, and the least glorious moment of a sentient being, I found endless fascination with the different stages of decay. Great artworks of Odd Nerdrum, Lucian Freud and John William Waterhouse showed me that there are numerous means of texture implementation and wide ranges of colour palette for the rendering of the human body. Studies of corpses also reminded me of my long-forgotten interests in the ghastly ancient Chinese folklore and numerous incomprehensible Eastern culture practices associated with ghost and death that I did not have the freedom to explore in depth before.



3. Qiming Sun, *Soliloquy of the Soundless II*, oil on board, 2018.

The Grotesque and the Sublime

It is commonly believed that the majority of western visual depiction of death has long been shrouded in grim darkness or explicit grotesqueness. From 13th centuries' plague mural to the Vanitas painting of the 17th century, great amount of historical imageries of death were closely tied to the fear and agony caused by ravaging pestilence sweep across the land, or the chaos and mass slaughter during endless warfare. These artworks heavily emphasis on a pessimistic notion of Memento Mori: remember all must end, remember death comes for us all. This reality emphatically amplifies people's dismay and helplessness when confronted with the inevitability of death. Moreover, only a single aspect of death was presented in these particular works, whilst other intricate facets were neglected.

A contemporary Japanese artist, Fuyuko Matsui on the contrary focuses on demonstrating the said neglected facets of death. Matsui was firstly trained in Western academic style oil painting. Later, she studied traditional Japanese watercolour. She combines the essence of two distinct art styles and creates her unique style. There's still a strong sense of fear, torment, and agony in Matsui's paintings. Despite the over the top gruesome subject matter, she renders it with such lightness and elegance that her subject matter of putrid corpse is transformed into something that diverges from the traditional ghastly depiction of death. In her hands, the decayed flesh transforms into the ethereal. The excessive blood and vulgar exposure of decay favoured by western artists are absent from Matsui's image. Instead, she associates death with beauty and combines these two distinct elements that are rarely bought together. Her work thus elevates painting from one-dimensional shock value or the traditional notion of Memento Mori and morphs it into a much more sophisticated genre.

Another quality that I admire about Matsui's work is her method of delivering the message. It doesn't have to be an obvious statement. Much like how she projects her fear, it's not about how loud one can scream out their opinion, but how deep one could let their idea seep under people's skin.

The scroll painting *Keeping up the Pureness* is one of her rendition of *Nine Stages of Decay*. Known as Kusozu (九相図), it is a Mahayana Buddhist subject matter that depicts nine different stages of a decomposing corpse. Since medieval times, the depiction of Kusozu in Japanese art has always involved a female body. It was initially used to teach men that even beautiful women will eventually turn into a putrid mess, so they are encouraged to constrain their carnal desire. This opinion is, of course, extremely male-centric, and ascetic. It also objectifies women and implies that women are inherently impure.

In response, Matsui decides to paint a new Kusozu from a female point of view. In her version, the scene becomes a supernatural dissection. The gaze of the body engages the viewer directly in a firm but not aggressive confrontation. The artist exposes all her internal organs but not in a revolting manner. Her exposed uterus which contains an embryo reminds the viewer that the part which was falsely deemed "unclean" by society, is the most crucial part of life-giving. Depicting this aspect of the body also suggests that life and death are inseparable. The artist provides many symbolic plants in the surrounding area of the body. These include the lily as a universal symbol of purity; the peach which associates with fertility and sexuality in East Asia, and other cryptic motifs open for the viewer's interpretation.

Matsui carefully plans her symbolism and embed them into skillfully crafted imagery. Instead of displaying the excessive grotesqueness of death that shocks and repels the viewer, she has chosen to feature aspects of death that's barely touched upon by other artists. More specifically, Matsui explores the unique beauty of the human body under different conditions. She portrays the peculiar, convoluted muscle structure beneath the human skin. Her seductive imagery evokes mystery and a concoction of emotions. She does not merely kindle stereotypical sentiments like fear, or disgust. Her artwork has made death more approachable, even appealing. Myriad layers of symbolism in her paintings also ignite the viewer's curiosity. These layers invite viewers to explore the complex pictorial reality that was imaginatively fabricated by the artist.

The unique, poetic craftsmanship of Fuyuko Matsui inspires me to explore the concept of death beyond the limitation of horror and shock and to highlight overlooked elements, especially the under-appreciated beauty of death.

4. Qiming Sun, *Wedlock* (detail), oil on canvas, 2017.

Live in Languish

One of the most prominent aspects that I attempt to evoke in my imagery is the interaction between the living and the dead regarding historical Chinese cultural practices. *Wedlock* (illustration 5) is my depiction of the tradition of posthumous marriage in Imperial China. Family value is a fundamental aspect of ancient Chinese culture, and the perpetuation of

5. Qiming Sun, *Wedlock*, oil on canvas, 2017.

bloodline was imperative. Consequentially, it was the top priority for parents to marry off their children once they come of age.

Arranged marriage was especially crucial among the aristocracy. A tactically conceived wedding between noble houses would maintain not only their high social status but also ensures the proper burial rites for the younger generation. According to old customs, an unmarried person especially a female was strictly prohibited to be buried inside the family tomb. They would not have a dedicated spirit tablet[2] placed in the family shrine in commemoration of them. It is believed that without a decent burial, the spirit of the dead will become wondering ghost lost between three realms. They would be restless and cannot proceed to reincarnation. Therefore, if someone of eligible age died unmarried, their parents will use all their resources to arrange a marriage for the dead with a living spouse.

The living spouse is usually someone of low social status that could be purchased like an object. They are generally unfortunate prostitutes, servants or slaves. After an elaborate ceremony, the dead individual will be buried in the family tomb, and the living spouse will live the rest of his or her lives as part of the family. Despite being married into the noble family, the person of a lower social class was treated no better than the servants. Their fate of a lifetime of incarceration is sealed the moment they drink cross-cupped wine with the dead. The opulent manor would turn into their inescapable penitentiary. An ostentatious wedding gown became a symbol of ponderous chains.

Even after their death, the individual's name would not be mentioned anywhere, and their lives were merely disposable tools for the rich and powerful. The devastating abuse and

[2] A spirit tablet is an ornate wooden placard engraved with name of a deity or past ancestor, which is placed on altar as a effigy for worshiping.

desolation would drive most living spouse trapped inside this arrangement into hysteria within few years.

In this narrative, the villain is not played by the dead or the spirits. It is the tyrannical tradition, the living people of power forged this shackle, that reaches beyond the veil, and inflicts endless tribulation on both the living and the dead.

6. Qiming Sun, *Naqjjiq • To Our Deaths And Beyond*, oil on canvas, 2018.

While many people see death as their worst nightmare, others view death as a mere gateway to another realm. If life itself is the source of pain and suffering, death will instead become salvation. *Naqjjiq • To Our Deaths And Beyond* (illustration 6) speaks of the Chinese cultural phenomenon of double suicide, which started in the early 18th century. This practice is iconic among Nakhi tribe which is a minority ethnic group based in southwest China.

Before 1730, many minority ethnic groups were self-governed under the system called Tusi[3]. Nakhi people value the purity, harmony, and freedom of love significantly, as their culture revolves around shamanistic nature worship. Unlike their peers, the youths of Nakhi tribe were free to date and wed whomever they chose to love. After 1730 however, the emperor ended Tusi system of all Ethnic groups to centralize the power. Naturally, all the regulations, including arranged marriage were reinforced. The devastation swept across undisturbed Nakhi villages like a volatile pestilence. Countless young couples were torn apart. They were utterly powerless to withstand this violation. Any resistance of arranged marriage was perceived as defiance of the emperor's power and was deemed as treason by the crown. Should a couple decide to elope, their family members would be in grave danger. The escaped couples would also be remembered as irresponsible, and selfish cowards. The unshakable faith in true love that embedded deep within Nakhi culture caused many lovers to choose sacrifice heroically rather than to spend the rest of their lives in hiding. Similar to Harakiri[4] in Japanese Samurai culture, Nakhi people choose to

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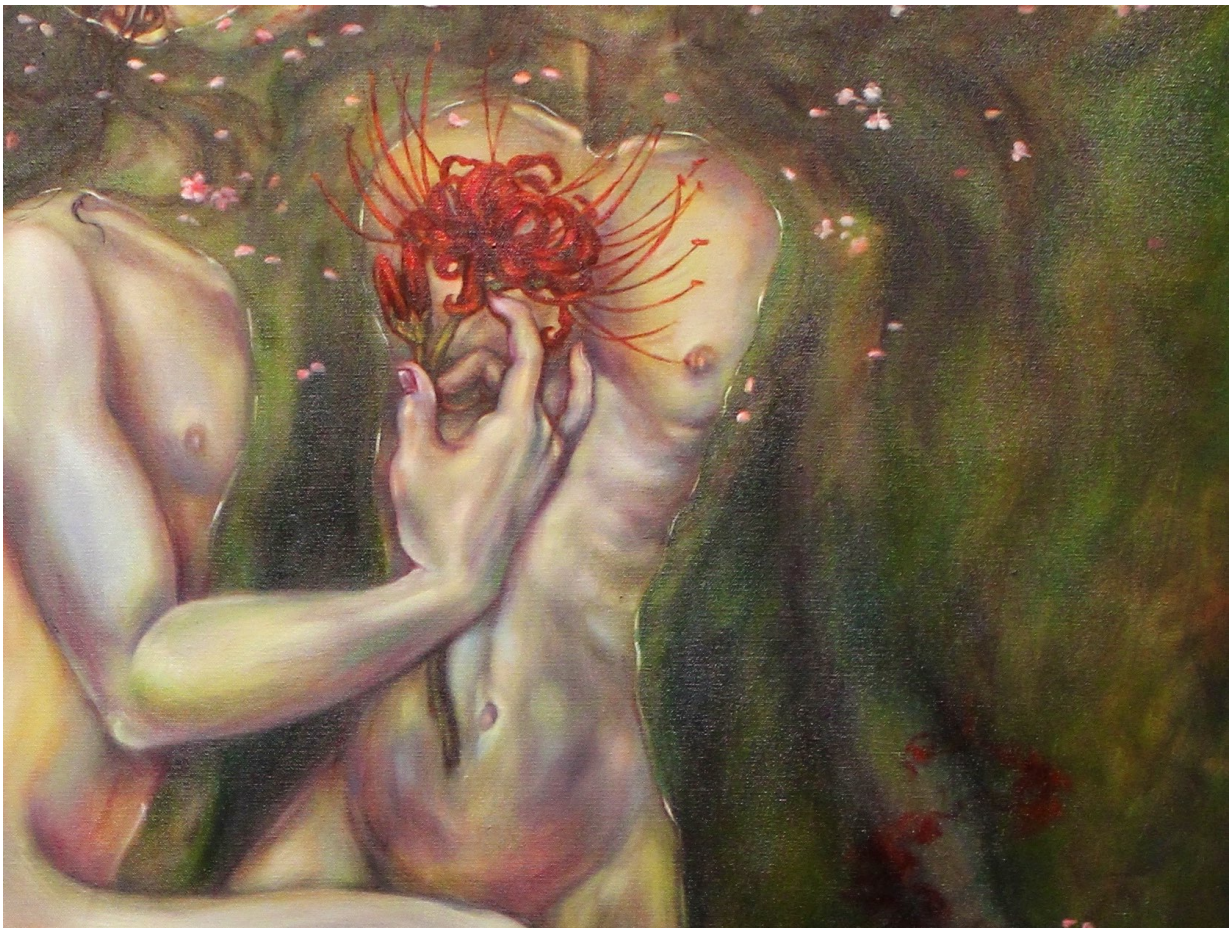
[3] Tusi (土司) were hereditary tribal leaders recognized as imperial officials by the Yuan, Ming, and Qing-era Chinese government. They ruled certain ethnic minorities in southwest China and Indochinese peninsula, nominally on behalf of the central government.

[4] Harakiri (腹切り) is a form of Japanese ritual suicide by self disembodiment, commonly practiced by samurai upon their defeat in battle, to voluntarily die with honour rather than fall into the hands of their enemy.

voluntarily die with grace and dignity. The lovers would rather die together than surrender to the oppressive legislation, and let the living do them apart.

Typically when the Nakhi people commit double suicide, they will host a grand feast with their friends the night before. The couple would wear their most resplendent attires, bring out their finest brews. Beneath dazzling constellations, near ancient lakes, the group would dance, laugh, sing and drink from dusk till dawn. When the blazing bonfire was gradually reduced to smouldering cinders, and when their inebriated friends were slumbering soundly on the poppy field, the lovers would leave quietly. They would find a serene grotto, ingest poisonous flowers such as aconite, then journey together to the afterlife.



7. Qiming Sun, *Naqjjiq • To Our Deaths And Beyond* (detail), oil on canvas, 2018.

Instead of aconite, I choose to use an alternative lethal flower with more symbolic meanings called Manjusaka, which is commonly known as the red spider lily. Native to southern China, Korea, Nepal and Japan, these poisonous flowers generally bloom around cemeteries. According to *Lotus Sutra*, Manjusaka is the very flower that grows along the riverbank of Sanzu River[5] guiding lost souls to the nether. When the flower of Manjusaka blooms, its leaves fall out, and when its leaves sprout the flower wilts. Leaf and flower separated eternally by life and death, which is the reason why the flower language for Manjusaka is "To never see each other."

Lovers that are forcefully separated in life are reunited once more in death by ingesting the deadly flower which symbolizes eternal separation. The traditional Catholic wedding vows always ends with "until death do us apart," since people often view death as the greatest threat to any happy relationship. However, when the biggest obstacle to love is created by the living society, would death still be more likely to tear the lovers apart?

Aging, the path which gradually leads to the eventual demise of any organic matter, is also greatly feared by many. For centuries scholars, alchemists and mystics spent their entire life navigating arcane knowledge, trying to seek out the secret to immortality. The insalubrious longing for everlasting life had given people aberrant audacity to ingest myriad experimental potions made of peculiar verdures and toxic minerals, that is perceived as elixirs of eternal youth at the time. Such is the risk people were willing to take to walk in this world for another day. Even in contemporary times, numerous individuals will make no haste on spending fortunes on eclectic dietary supplements, cosmetics, or even plastic surgeries, hoping to stretch out their

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[5] Sanzu River (三途の川) is the river leading to the underworld in Japanese folklore, similar to River Styx in Greek mythology.

precious lifespan, or to at least stretch out their skin and create an illusion of perpetual youth. However, is immortality genuinely worthy of all these sacrifices?

8. Qiming Sun, *Bardo • Eternal Durance*, oil on canvas, 2017.

"Bardo" (བར་དོ་) is a concept of soul's transitional state shortly after death. This concept is heavily emphasized in the doctrine of Vajrayana Buddhism. It was described in *Bardo Thodol* (བར་དོ་ཐོས་གྲོལ་, *The after-death experiences on the Bardo plane,* or *Tibetan Book of the Dead,* 8th century.) as an intermediate stage of soul's existence between one's death and the reincarnation. In Chinese folklore, " Bardo" was given another more intricate connotation, which is the main inspiration for my piece *Bardo • Eternal Durance* (illustration 8). It is said that if an individual had grown overly attached to the mortal realm, their consciousness could enter the Bardo state, and remain in the physical world. Unlike lost spirits or vengeful ghosts lingering in the land of the living, being in the Bardo state means that the soul of said individual would be permanently bound to their physical body. Their mind would remain fully conscious, and continue to live despite the death of their mortal physical being.

The everlasting consciousness that escapes from the inexorable end, the Bardo state is to be considered a state of immortality. However, these immortal beings would live the rest of their life in a form that no mortals would ever dream to experience: to remain conscious even when their bones were reduced to dust. Unable to move or breathe, the soul in a Bardo state would vividly experience every stage of their body's decay. They would feel the indescribable sensation of bacteria digesting their organs slowly, causing their body to bloat and deflate. They would have to endure the cascading pain of scavengers eating away their skin and flesh, feel thousands of maggots burrowing through their eyeballs, and beetles breeding inside their windpipe. Even when their bones are dried and bleached by the scourging sun, when their marrow rendered shapeless by the sweeping sand, their consciousness lives on.

The insatiable obsession for eternity, the myriad emotional appendages attached to this world had driven people into the Bardo state, which would allow one's consciousness to remain in the mortal realm permanently. Those who were trapped in such a condition have virtually achieved the centuries-old obsession of humanity: immortality. Would they finally be satisfied to exist in such a form and enjoy their endless life? Alternatively, would they instead choose to live and die like a mere mortal?

9. Qiming Sun, *Soliloquy of the Soundless I*, oil on board, 2018.

Rest in Peace

For many people, making peace with death means suicide. While these two acts share specific affinities, the mentality behind them is vastly distinct. Suicide at its core is an act of absconding. To prematurely end one's life so that they may escape from the unbearable affliction, humiliation, or grief in life. For those who chose to walk this path, death might not be the optimal solution, but the only choice left in desperation.

Conversely, those who embrace death never regard life and death as two different matters. They instead accept both as equals. To them, death is but a beginning of a new chapter, a crossroad on the endless journey of existence. When their life is coming to an end, they would gladly shed their mortal coils and move on.

The idea of treating life and death as an entirety, is an essential teaching of Zhuang Zhou, one of the most influential Taoism philosopher. In his classic *Zhuangzi*(莊子, 3rd century BC.), Zhuang Zhou states that the key to a happy life is to enjoy both life and death, as a whole. He points out that many people are enslaved by their fear of death. These people are enthralled by their lust for life, and for them death death will undisputedly reap away all their riches and belongings, along with their powers and controls. Their trepidation would only intensify as death draws closer, and when it is time for them to face the inescapable, they will crumble in sheer terror and despondency. On the contrary, should one learn to relinquish their grip on power and spoils, and one begin to realize they are part of nature's flow, then they would be able to enjoy their life thoroughly, and would not be engulfed by dread even when facing death.

Gelid Ecdysis (illustration10) is my visual representation of such mentality: A lone elderly figure spending the last moment of his life on a glacial ledge that is surrounded by the wintry onset. He calmly removes his clothing as a symbol of stripping away his connections with the culture and social status that partially defines him. He peels away from their wealth and possessions revealing his most natural state: naked and vulnerable, just like how he came to this world as a newborn.

10. Qiming Sun, *Gelid Ecdysis*, oil on canvas, 2018.

He might know not of what lies ahead, but he understands that any struggle against nature's order would only beget unwarranted anguish and fruitless ends. So, he choose to let go of his ego, his aspiration to take control over the inevitable, as he awaits in the crystalline water, for the journey riddled with possibilities, mystery, and suspense.

What does the afterlife look like? The answer may vary significantly from numerous cultures and beliefs. Taoism, like many other Asian beliefs with shamanic origins, reckons that the souls of all creatures exist as a form of energy known as "Qi"[6]. It exists in many forms: from morning dew to forest breeze, "Qi" is part of nature. It is the energy that can transfer from one physical body into another when the body expires.

In the *Zhibeiyou*(知北遊, *Knowledge Rambling in the North,* 3rd century BC.) section of *Zhuangzi*'s outer chapter, Zhuang Zhou alludes that all sentient beings are part of nature, the happenings of life and death is just the act of life force and energy shifting amongst different physical hosts, much like other natural occurrences like snowfalls and thunderstorms.

Spirit Cascade (illustration 11) is my attempt to convey this unique perspective of death. The hanging figure might be a victim of an atrocious barbarity or an individual who chose to end his life. The cause of one's death means very little amidst the verdant thickets far from civilization. This forest is where nature could take its course wholly undisturbed. When the life force seeps away from the human husk, delicate bloom flourishes beneath the lifeless limbs: Mandrake, native to the Mediterranean and the Himalayas, it is a peculiar flower with humanoid roots. It was also a common belief that mandrake would sprout from where the semen of a

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[6] Qi (氣) is believed to be the vital force forming part of any living entity in traditional Chinese culture.

hanged man dripped on to the soil, and grow the roots that resemble the hanged victim. Near the meadow, a pile of forsaken remains lay soundlessly, providing nurseries for the forest moss. The passing white fox could be an envoy from the nether realm, or an ordinary cub foraging for food, or anything in-between that is being obscured by the forest brume.

11. Qiming Sun, *Spirit Cascade*, oil on canvas, 2018.

In Taoism cosmology, death does not mean the end of existence. When one entity passes away, it provides nourishment and gives life to many other beings.

Laozi, the founder of philosophical Taoism, summarizes the exchange and transition of life fore as part of "Tao"(道), the natural order of the universe. In *Dao De Jing* (道德經*, Classic of the Way of Power,* 6th century BC.), Laozi reckons that Tao is the origin of life and at the same time the final rest of all beings. The living and the dead never stay in their condition for too long, as the energy within nature is forever shifting and transitioning. Despite the various changes and occurrences, the universe remains eternal. What comes from nature, will always return to nature, this is the never-ending circle of death and life.

12. Qiming Sun, *Spirit Cascade* (detail), oil on canvas, 2018.

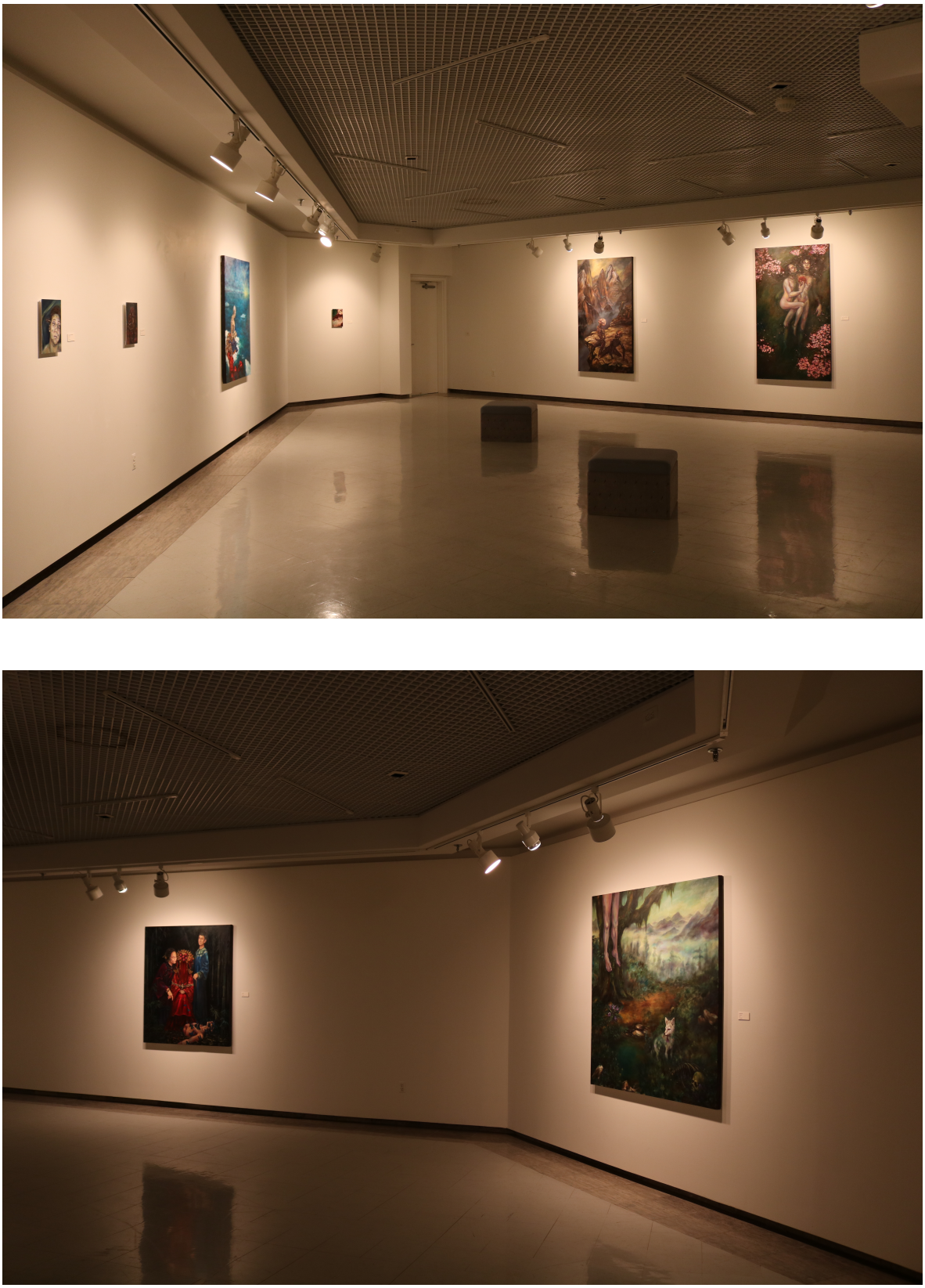
Conclusion

I title my exhibition ***Bellus Mortis***, which is a twist on a well-known medical term "rigor mortis" (Latin: rigor "stiffness," mortis "of death"). In pathology, rigor mortis is used to describe the third stage of death, when the limbs of the corpse stiffen. I replace "rigor" with "bellus"- the word for "beautiful" in Latin. By twisting the words, a frosty medical term transforms into an odd and perplexing phrase. Death is seldom associated with beauty, as it is eschewed by much of humanity.

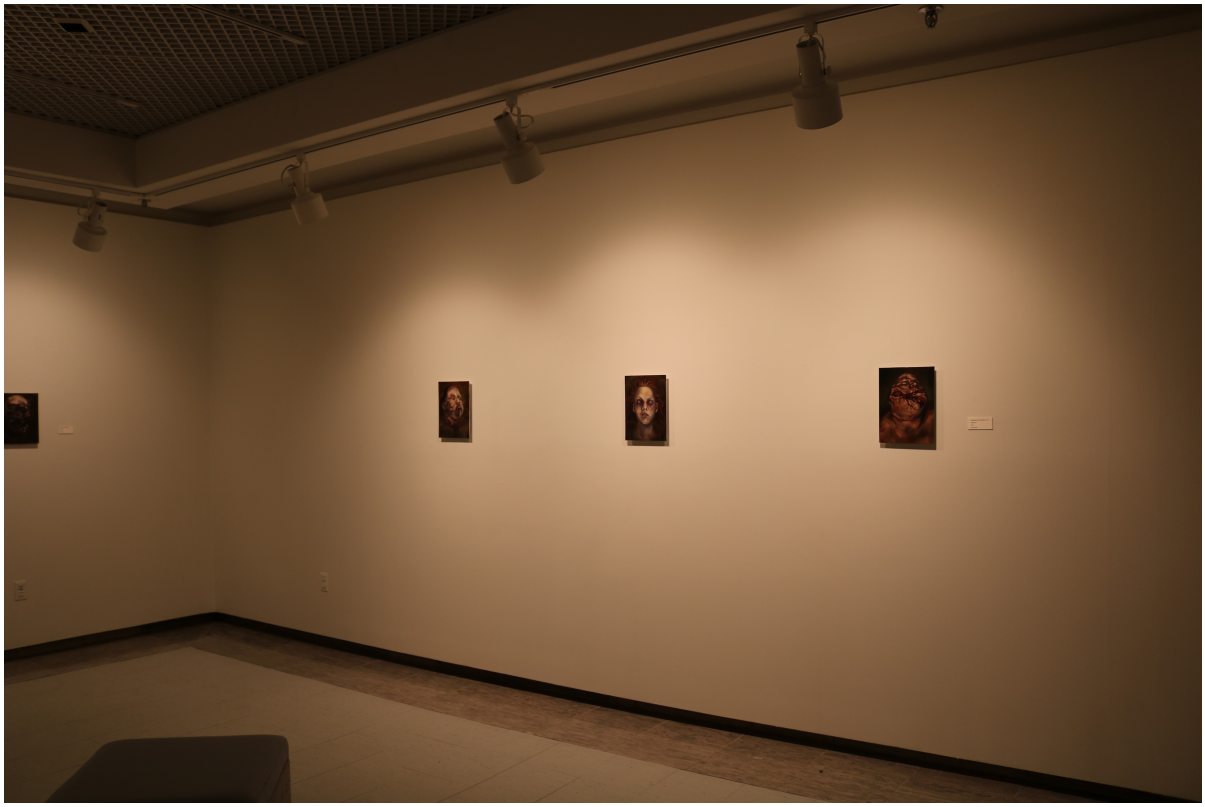
The pictorial narratives within ***Bellus Mortis*** aim to present a portrayal of life and death which drastically differs from their common perception. This series of imagery also is intended to introduce various inconspicuous Eastern philosophical perspectives on death that not only regard death in divergent manners but also blur the boundary between life and death.

Bellus Mortis Installed

13. Qiming Sun, *Bellus Mortis*, Installation photo I, II.



14. Qiming Sun, *Bellus Mortis*, Installation photo III, IV.



15. Qiming Sun, Bellus Mortis, Installation photo V, VI.

16. Qiming Sun, *Bellus Mortis*, Installation photo VII.

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